

Ashes by metal_jenny_blog

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Hopper's demons rear their ugly head.

Ashes

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Suggestions/prompts welcome.

Joyce arrived home later that afternoon to find Hopper on the porch, staring at his hands. An unlit cigarette twirled in his fingers.

The air was chilly, the blades of grass on the lawn crunching under her and Will's feet. Clouds boiled in the afternoon sky, edged with a greenish hue, and the air was heavy with a slightly metallic taste that she could feel on the back of her tongue and deep in her sinuses. No doubt about it – a heck of a storm was on its way.

Will breezed past Hopper with a casual flick of his hand and a low “Hey, Hop,” as he went inside. Joyce slowed her stride and as she went up the bowed step onto the sagging porch. She deftly stepped around the loose floorboard and stood opposite Hopper.

A pregnant pause hung in the air, but Joyce didn't rush it. In a way, she supposed that's why she and Hopper worked. Her emotions were always on the surface, gliding across her body like a second skin. Her nerves were always exposed. Lonnie had been the same, hence their angry fights and even angrier sex. Their emotions arced off one another like the tendrils in the plasma ball Will had used as a night light. He'd begged her to throw it out after last year's business – something about the pink tentacles reminding him of the Mind Flayer.

No, Jim wasn't like that. Sure, he could have a temper when he wanted to. She'd heard the stories from both him and El of their clashes in the days when she was in hiding. But the wick was long, and burned slow. His emotions were deeply buried under the shields of sarcasm and shtick, a practised armour honed during high school, then Vietnam, and the death of his daughter. Like the rings on a tree,

layer upon layer of tragedy had settled itself around Hopper's body, and the anger and hurt had to burrow its way through, like a grub, to hit the air. He always cooled her panic, the rawness of her own expressions doused by his steadiness.

Jim put the cigarette between his lips, and cupped his hand around the flare of the lighter. He flicked the top back down, and then inhaled deeply. He tipped his head back against the patched boards making up the wall behind him, and finally met her eyes.

Joyce let the silence hang for another heartbeat and then spoke.

"Did you go?"

Hopper exhaled. His eyes were shiny.

"Yeah."

A week ago, he'd been out of sorts. Not angry, just sullen. Most questions were greeted with gruff, one-word answers or worse, none at all. He'd distanced himself from El, leaving early in the morning before she and Will woke, and coming home after she went to bed. His beer had gone untouched in the fridge and the bed was often empty beside Joyce as he battled night after night of insomnia. El's brown eyes became fathomless pools of worry at his increasingly odd behaviour. Eventually, it was Jonathan that confronted him, telling him that whatever was bothering him needed to be dealt with. Resolved that it had gone on long enough, he crawled into bed with Joyce and held her, and asked her to look after El for a few days. The next morning, he got in the Blazer and drove to New York.

6 years ago, it had been an impossibly beautiful day when they had farewelled Sara. Cheerful sunshine had mocked the sombre occasion. Her ashes were interred at a cemetery on the outskirts of the city. He'd only been there once before, the day of the service. Diane had visited every week afterwards, and Jim instead visited a bar and got roaring drunk. Then, as their marriage spiralled, Diane went twice, three times a week and sometimes more. Jim matched her visits with bar after bar in the block near their apartment building. Sometimes he came home, sometimes he didn't. Diane turned a blind eye to it for as long as she could. When he got involved in a fight that put him

in the hospital with a broken ankle, wrist and a concussion, she'd had enough. As soon as the plaster casts came off, she served him with divorce papers. He didn't fight it. 3 months later he arrived back in Hawkins.

"I felt guilty," Hopper said quietly, returning to the present. The light had faded around them. Joyce had fished out her own cigarettes at this point, and her face was briefly illuminated in the gloom of the descending twilight. She drew back and flicked the ash off the railing.

"Why guilty?"

He sighed and averted his eyes. "She got sick, and then I lost her. I couldn't save her. Then I treated Diane in the worst possible way. I punished her, because she'd made me happy. She loved me, she gave me a beautiful daughter, and by the end of it I couldn't decide if I loved her or hated her. So I drove her away. I came back here to basically die." He paused. "I was ok with that. I fucked up, I'd failed to keep the good in my life, and so, I was comfortable having nothing." He stood up, crushing the butt in the ashtray next to him and moving towards Joyce. He placed his hands either side of her petite figure, where she leaned on the rail.

"I felt guilty because despite everything, despite my abject failure as a father and a husband, I was given a second chance. What was to stop it ending the same way it did last time? How can someone who had been through that much, then get stuck with me for a father? I locked her in that damn cabin for a year, cut her off from everyone, I was exactly like Brenner! She even said it herself! And I brought that here, to you, and-

"Jim," Joyce interrupts, putting her hands on his forearms. She tilted her chin upwards to look upon his face. His eyes were brimming with tears at this point and, at her touch, they broke free to slip down his cheeks and disappeared into his beard. "Did you ever stop to think that you needed a reason to stop punishing yourself? Reasons, plural? As for your methods, everyone was in danger if they knew about her – not just El and you. Me, the boys, all her friends, you kept us all safe. You kept her safe. You're nothing like Brenner. She would have frozen to death in the woods last winter without you," She stepped closer and wrapped her arms around his waist, and pressed her cheek

to his chest, over his heart. It thudded in her ear, it matched her own. "You weren't responsible for Sara's death. And you're not dishonouring her memory by loving and nurturing another daughter. Sara will always be your little girl. But it's ok to have El too." She looked up him. "Your heart is big enough for all of us, Hop."

Jim swallowed the sob that was caught in his throat. He pushed his nose into Joyce's hair and smelled her camomile shampoo, not trusting himself to speak. He waited a few moments, allowing his heart to slow and his shoulders to relax, the tension of driving for days and visiting Sara's grave beginning to ease.

"Speaking of El, I need to talk to her."

"Tomorrow," Joyce replied. "She's at Max's tonight. But she's ok, Hop. She has some questions, so you should take some time to answer them. I know there are some pictures in that box, it might be time to show them to her."

Hope grunted in agreement and then surprise, as Joyce pulled away from him and led him to the house. The boys had gone to their respective rooms, one lamp in the hall illuminating the way. Joyce guided him the bedroom and there, gently unbuttoned his shirt and slipped it off his shoulders. She unbuckled his belt and pushed his jeans down, Jim obligingly stepping out of them and kicking them to the side. She shucked her own clothes and peeled back the comforter and sheets, and Jim gratefully collapsed into the bed.

Joyce nestled herself in his arms, and Hopper's chin found its familiar nook in between her neck and shoulder. His breath ruffled her hair, and he closed his eyes. Outside, the heavens finally opened and the rain began sheeting down.

He slept.